

out better than a solution from the private sector. That said, we should not stand for trading in government bureaucrats for insurance company bureaucrats. I cannot stress this enough: The ultimate decisions must be in the hands of every individual patient. Physicians should be in charge of explaining the benefits and risks of each and every test and procedure to the patients, and the patient will decide how to proceed. When necessary, the patient will consult with their insurance provider, seeking guidance about extraordinary procedures or hospital stays or whatever is required.

We must take steps to change our health care system, but socialism is not the answer. Let's work together to find solutions that are patient-focused and not government-focused.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. PAUL) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. PAUL addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

THE \$10 BILLION LANDS BILL: ANOTHER BIG GOVERNMENT BOON-DOGGLE

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Tennessee (Mr. DUNCAN) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. DUNCAN. Mr. Speaker, today the House, unfortunately, voted overwhelmingly in favor of the Senate lands bill, a \$10 billion bill that we simply cannot afford. Fortunately, it did not pass with the required two-thirds vote necessary for passage under suspension of the rules. However, all this really means is that it will now be taken up under regular order, where it should have been in the first place and which requires only a majority vote. Thus there is no question this bill will pass the next time it's taken up.

But I hope more people across this land will start thinking about what we are doing to ourselves. I realize that since we are now throwing around trillions, spending money like never before, that maybe people don't really think that \$10 billion sounds like that much anymore. But to anyone who stops to think about it, \$10 billion is still an awful lot of money, and it becomes even more when you realize that we are having to borrow all this money we're spending since we surely don't have surplus cash, and we are now 12 trillion 104 billion dollars in debt at the Federal level. I realize that 12 trillion 104 billion is an incomprehensible figure. But what it really means is that we will soon not be able to pay all of our Social Security and veterans' pensions and all the other things we promised our own people with money that will buy anything.

I used to say what we were doing to our children and grandchildren was ter-

rible. But now I believe that tough economic times, already here for many, are going to come for almost everyone in the next 10 or 15 years, if not sooner.

When a family gets deeply, head-over-heels in debt, it gets in even worse trouble if it goes out and greatly increases its spending even more. That is exactly the situation our Federal Government is in today, living way beyond its means.

This lands bill is a combination of 170 bills, which cost \$10 billion in total. In addition to that, it is a luxury that we do not need and which will be very harmful in the long run. We already are having trouble funding and taking care of the Federal lands we have now. The National Park Service claims it has a \$9 billion backlog on things it needs to do in our 379 national park units. It sounds great for a politician to create a park, but we now have so many parks at the Federal, State, and local levels that we cannot even come close to getting adequate use of them unless all of our people suddenly find a way to go on permanent vacations.

Another problem that few people think about is that we keep creating so many local and State parks, and expanding others, especially at the Federal level, that we are taking way too much land off the tax rolls. We keep decreasing private property at the same time the schools and all the other government agencies keep coming to us telling us they need more money.

These 170 bills, combined into one bill, create 2 million acres of new wilderness, 330,000 acres of national conservation areas, and restrict energy development on millions of acres.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce says this bill "substantially hampers energy development and private property rights by withdrawing millions of acres of land from oil and gas exploration . . . shackling U.S. energy exploration and development at this critical time would substantially jeopardize America's already fragile economy."

It's going to drive up prices, utility bills, Mr. Speaker, and it's going to destroy jobs.

The Federal Government today owns about 30 percent of the land of this Nation. It has 84 million acres in the National Park System. It has 150 million acres in the Wildlife Refuge System. It has 193 million acres in the National Forest System. I could go on and on with other Federal lands, but it's not necessary.

Then State and local governments and quasi-governmental agencies control another 20 percent of the land. Half the land is now already in some type of public ownership now.

On top of all this, there are now 1,667 land trusts and 1,400 conservancy groups at least. These are figures from 2 years ago; so there may be more now. USA Today, which published these figures, said that these private trusts and conservancy groups control about 40 million acres and that they're taking over an average of more than 2½ mil-

lion more each year. These lands are eventually sold or turned over to the government at great cost to the taxpayer and causing further increases in taxes on the property that remains in private hands. Then we're putting more and more restrictions or limitations on the private property that can be developed, thus driving up the cost of homes to astronomical levels in many areas.

Mr. Speaker, we are slowly but surely doing away with private property in this country. If we don't wake up and realize that private property is one of the keys to both our prosperity and our freedom, we are going to really cause serious problems for everyone except for the very wealthy.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Virginia (Mr. GOODLATTE) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. GOODLATTE addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

ANNIVERSARY OF THE 1937 NATURAL GAS TRAGEDY OF NEW LONDON, TEXAS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. GOHMERT) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. GOHMERT. Mr. Speaker, March 18 will mark the 72nd anniversary of what freshly graduated newscaster Walter Cronkite called the "worst school disaster in American history." I stand before the House today to commemorate those students and educators who so tragically lost their lives that afternoon as well as to encourage the survivors.

The 1930s saw many families in East Texas with hope as they fought to regain what had been lost in so many parts of the country during the Great Depression.

□ 1615

With the discovery of oil in northern Rusk County, the City of New London, Texas, boasted one of the richest rural school districts in America. They had just built a state-of-the-art school that would make any school district envious.

But at approximately 3:18 p.m. on March 18, 1937, many of those same families would lose forever the promise of youth while east Texans and people around the world would bear the pain of losing a community's entire generation.

It was on that date, at that time, the New London school did become the site of the worst school disaster in American history. In those days, natural gas had no odor. That odorless gas started leaking from a tap line and accumulated in the massive crawl space beneath the school building.

In an instant, a spark from a sanding machine in the basement ignited the gas, creating an explosion heard miles

away. Witnesses said the building was lifted into the air.

When it came crashing down, its victims were buried in a mass of steel, concrete, brick and debris. Frantic parents, neighbors, oil-field roughnecks, and volunteers around the State ranging from Boy Scouts to Texas Rangers converged on the devastating scene. Many dug with nothing but their bare hands.

Men, women and children worked all through the night battling rain, fatigue and unimaginable grief. They worked to reach those buried underneath the mountain of twisted metal. Within 17 hours, all of the debris had been heroically removed, and all victims had been located.

A cenotaph, a tall monument, stands silently in New London across from the disaster site bearing the names of the 296 students, teachers and visitors who instantly lost their lives. The subsequent death count from injuries sustained that day brought the final count to 311.

Within weeks, the Texas legislature passed a law requiring that an odor be added to natural gas. That practice quickly spread worldwide, saving countless lives in the aftermath of that devastating loss. Now the odor added to natural gas is unmistakable and allows anyone to know instantly there is a leak requiring caution and repair.

This weekend we will have a formal observance, and it will be my honor to be with those amazing people of New London, Texas. We will pay tribute to those hundreds of young lives whose faces were full of hope and promise one moment, yet left lifeless moments later.

We will also honor those who heroically fought to rescue the victims, while we lend sympathy to those who bore the burden of tragic loss. We also honor those who have survived that day when their lives were forever changed.

May God bless their memory, may God heal the wounded memories, and may God bless those who have carried on in New London, Texas, ever since that heartbreaking day.

END PRACTICE OF EARMARKS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Arizona (Mr. FLAKE) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. FLAKE. Mr. Speaker, today, President Obama made two major announcements. First, he wants serious earmark reform. In particular, he wants to get rid of earmarks that represent no-bid contracts to private companies.

Second, he will sign the \$410 billion omnibus spending bill containing nearly 9,000 earmarks, several thousand of which represent no-bid contracts to private companies. It should not go unnoticed that the announcement to rein in earmarks was made to great fanfare when the ceremony to sign the ear-

mark-laden omnibus into law was taking place in a quiet room away from public view.

So, Mr. Speaker, as much as we know we need adult supervision around here on the earmark question, I think it's safe to say that we are on our own. We can't expect the President to help us out that much. This is not a criticism of this President. The last President talked a lot about earmark reform but didn't carry a very big stick. In the end, he left it to us, and we didn't reform the process. We are in that same position today.

Mr. Speaker, the bill that's being signed into law today contains thousands and thousands of no-bid contracts to private companies. Many of those no-bid contracts to private companies will go to clients of the PMA Group, a lobbying firm that is currently under investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice. Yet we continued. We let it go in this bill.

So I think those of us who worry that we are not going to be serious about earmark reform this coming session have reason to be worried, despite the announcements to get serious about the prospect both by the President and by the Democratic majority here.

Let me just tell you a little about the scope of the problem we face. I have here 83 pages. These represent certification letters that Members of Congress write in order to request an earmark. These requests were made for the 2009 defense bill which we passed in September of last year without any debate where somebody could challenge any one of the earmarks which were more than 2,000 in that piece of legislation.

These 83 I hold in my hand now were requests for earmarks made to clients of the PMA Group, again the firm that is under investigation by the Department of Justice. In every one of these cases, a private company is listed here to receive the earmark.

I will just read through a couple. This is one where the recipient of this earmark is to go to Ocean Power Technologies located at Pier 21 in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Here is another. This one is to go to L-3 Communications Systems project located in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Here is another for Parametric Technology Corporation located at 140 Kendrick Street, Needham, Massachusetts.

There is another for General Dynamics Ordnance and Tactical Systems, Scranton Operations in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

These are all no-bid contracts to private companies. They are all to clients of the PMA Group.

In every case here, in all 83, those who requested these earmarks for these private companies, these no-bid contracts, then received, or before, in every case here, received a contribution either from executives at the PMA Group or the PAC operated from the PMA Group.

So we have a problem here, Mr. Speaker, that we need to address. Now, there were some reforms that have been outlined today saying that no-bid contracts will have to be competitively bid. If these no-bid contracts, if these companies are actually listed and the Federal agencies receive these requests and then bid it out, then it's not an earmark anymore.

So we have a bit of a misnomer here or something that doesn't quite make sense. But I think a lot of us who have been around here a while are justifiably skeptical that this will actually take place. Most of us were here in January of 2007 when the new majority outlined some earmark reforms in terms of transparency and accountability.

But we all in the past 2 years have realized that new rules are only as good as your willingness to enforce them, and these rules have gone unenforced.

Mr. Speaker, let's have some real earmark reform.

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

A message in writing from the President of the United States was communicated to the House by Ms. Evans, one of his secretaries.

FINANCIAL CONDITION OF OUR NATION

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 18, 2007, the gentleman from Missouri (Mr. AKIN) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

Mr. AKIN. Mr. Speaker, it's a pleasure to be able to join you and my colleagues here today. Our topic today is something that is on the minds of Americans everywhere. It's the question of our economy, the seriousness of the recession and the steps that we are taking, whether they are constructive or destructive to repairing the financial condition of our Nation, our allies and of the world.

I suppose it goes without saying that the recession is something that's serious. We can look at it in various different ways because it affects each of us in different ways.

We could look at it from the fact that there are people who are husbands that have wives and children, who have mortgages that are due and no job and their bank account, already seriously whittled down, is shrinking even farther.

We have those who have even been thrown out of their homes, those who have lost all of the money that they had saved for retirement, their 401(k)s are becoming 101(k)s. And it has a troubling aspect that we don't have any idea when is it going to let up and what will be the end of this ride, as the stock market goes down and down and people continue to suffer.

One of the things we have heard about over the last 6 years from our